



## The impact of English classics on increasing learners' motivation and cultural awareness: A case in Turkish EFL classes

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### Abstract

The impetus behind the development of this research is to study the potential influence(s) of cartoons (caricatures) on L2 learners in terms of gaining cultural awareness and enhancing their motivation levels. To that end, three English classics in the form of cartoons, *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, *Romeo & Juliet* by William Shakespeare, and *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson have been determined for the experiment. In this quasi-experimental research design, 47 learners of English were asked to read these cartoons illustrated either with colourful or colourless pictures, whereas randomly selected 20 people in the population were only exposed to plain texts. An assessment form, statistically found valid and reliable, developed by the researchers after a comprehensive literature review and getting approvals of two professors in the field in content validity has been utilized in the study. Accordingly, the findings point out the fact that the first group who has aimed at learning the target language through cartoons has adopted more positive attitude towards the language and its culture. Briefly, the current research emphasizes the importance of cartoons in increasing learners' cultural awareness, motivation and educational accomplishments in the end.

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*Keywords:* cartoons; motivation; culture; attitude

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Literature review

In the most general sense, language learning contains the variables of attitude, motivation, language background, L1 influence, the learner needs and culture. Of all the factors, motivation must be in the last category to be marginalized. This is because no matter which materials are selected, what kind of precautions are taken to manage teaching properly or what background or prior knowledge the learners bring to class, so long as appropriate motivational practices are not provided for them, the efforts might

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go down the drain. In addition, promoting motivation in EFL context will be to gain the learners' independency and awareness of own learning (Nation, 1999).

Another factor to be considered in teaching and learning continuum is the culture. As it is the united norms of a society on the way to make their identities in common, culture can be conveniently qualified as a way of life. That life style gathers everybody around the same expectations, beliefs, customs, behaviours, and some sensitive issues within the nation. In other words, culture is a reality originated by the people from the same country. Thus, though it may change over time, its breaking up from the language would pinpoint that the language cannot strive to survive (Abbaspour et al., 2012; Wardhaugh, 2010).

Due to the fact that culture is a multifaceted term and hence discussed a lot in language education over the years, both counter-productive and unprejudiced manners towards its integration to second or foreign language teaching subsist. According to Brown (2007), when someone is stimulated or guided to be involved in other cultural norms, his/her chauvinism would reveal itself and assimilating the language and its culture might be totally refracted in the end. Furthermore, some stereotypes or oversimplified manners may also lead people to underestimate other nations and thus would set a barrier to learn their language. At this point, cartoons can be adopted as a means of authentic tools in helping learners to become more self-aware of their attitudes toward target language, which will then ease avoiding the derision of other languages in acculturation process, and disallow them to experience a culture shock in the future.

As some different concerns might be expressed over cartoon, care must be taken to its correct definition in language teaching and learning. Illustrations or visuals include drawings, pictures, comic strips, cartoons, photographs, any kind of images, graphics, charts, maps or video films. In this sense, illustration can be regarded as an umbrella term covering any visual materials under the same title. As to the picture, it can be used as the synonym of image or a drawing. Yet, cartoon differs all of these definitions from an angle. It can be referred and recapitulated with the definition by McCloud (1993, p.9): "Juxtaposed images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer." Therefore, cartoon not only represents pictures about what is narrated in the text like other visuals in the list, but it gives place to a reading text as well. Those two unities bring cartoon forward since it both ensures visual assistance to understand the inscription much better, avails storing the words and helps retention process. Likewise, Brocka (1979) clarifies cartoon as the dominant figure of all the literary forms in that it maintains the tasks of text and pictures on an individual base.

In practical terms, cartoons have been viewed as salutary instruments in education and hence scholars have often studied on them to prove their convenience for language learners although some researchers, such as Ellman (1979) and Harris and Snow (2004), could not concur with them. For instance, Bahrani and Soltani (2001) emphasize pedagogical significance of cartoons particularly for low level language learners by drawing their attention to the stories after breaking the monotony in class, weakening the learners' anxiety, recreating them and exposing to L2 synchronically. Herein the intention is to create a non-threatening atmosphere, increase self-confidence and motivation via low affective filter, which would then upgrade the memory skills through analogies. That is, cartoons will be clearing the way for lateral thinking as a means of catalyser to deepen critical higher order cognitive skills.

In their further research, Bahrani and Soltani (2001) also dwell on the use of cartoons at warm-up or lead-in stages grounded in fact that they let the learners recognize each other especially in the very first lessons by virtue of the fact that cartoons are modified language inputs, and learners will not need to talk about the text too much but just state their opinions, emotions before the activity. Thereafter, cartoons would motivate learners to reflect their personal attitudes undertaking the role of a social

expertise. Along similar lines, Wilujeng and Lan (2014) include cartoons to determine the learners' attitude toward their application in learning Mandarin vocabulary. They have grouped the learners into three categories: working individually on online cartoons, working collaboratively on online cartoons, and the users of text-based instruction without online documents. The result points out that the second group carrying out a collaborative work through online cartoons has outscored the others in terms of the rates of success and their attitudes. They must have opted for doing this experiment via cartoons on account of collaborative models, which increases academic and social skills as well as online learning through which repetition will decrease and dependence on books die.

Uso-Juan and Martinez-Flor (2008) cite that language of cartoons is intelligible and handles daily subjects supplying an attractive context. According to Csabay (2006), in the light of the episode hypothesis of Oller (1983), cartoons' great success lies behind its logical structure, authenticity and real language use as in utterances, slang or idioms with cultural awareness. This makes the learners expose to life-like communications different from common course materials.

In the light of what has been mentioned, cartoons seem to constitute lynchpin of subserving language learning process in respect to motivation (Biebrich, 2006; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Hutchinson, 1949; Kakalios, 2002; Krashen, 2004; Sones, 1944; Wax, 2002), culture (Abbaspour et al., 2012; Clydesdale, 2008; Pereira & Miguel, 2014; Wardhaugh, 2010), language comprehension (Hudson, 1982; Kızıltan et al., 2014; Liu, 2004; Merç, 2003; Wright & Sherman, 1996), and attitude (Wilujeng & Lan, 2014). Having such a long and comprehensive range of impact area, cartoons ought to be scrutinized to detect the potential affinity between them as well as cultural awareness and motivations of language learners. That is why, this article has been designed to investigate and find answers of some research questions.

### *1.2. Research questions*

1. What are the general attitudes of learners towards cartoons in the study?
2. Do cartoons motivate the learners in language learning process?
3. Do cartoons raise EFL learners' cultural awareness in language learning process?

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Sample / Participants*

This study was conducted on 67 Turkish learners of English language at intermediate (B1) levels in order to investigate the impacts of cartoons on their cultural awareness and motivation towards the language in an application centre at a state university in Ankara, Turkey.

### *2.2. Instrument(s)*

In this quasi-experimental research design, after the usage of these texts in presenting cultural norms to check learners' attitudes, two rubrics for each text type were developed by the researchers after an extensive literature review and attaining approvals of two ELT professors. Both rubrics were prepared in Turkish not to block their comprehension skills. The first rubric was for coloured and black and white cartoon readers. In the experimental group, rubrics were made up of 15 questions. The other rubric model was designed for the control group who read classics without any pictures. It covered only five questions. Four of them were the same statements with the experimental group, yet the only difference in the control group's rubric was the question whether they would love to read texts in classical cartoons.

In this way, the control group's attitude to learning English without illustrated texts was also checked.

### 2.3. Data collection procedures

Three English classical cartoons *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, *Romeo & Juliet* by William Shakespeare and *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson were chosen, out of which only ten narrative texts were extracted for the study. They were classified under three main categories: coloured texts, black and white (colourless) texts and cartoons without comic strips (plain texts). After the learners were randomly selected, the population was divided into control and experimental groups. While coloured and black and white cartoons were given to the experimental group of 47, texts without illustrations were assigned to 20 learners in the control group.

### 2.4. Data analysis

In regard to the statistical results, the data were analysed by Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 21 for Windows packaged software. For the rubric tested on the experimental group, cronbach's alpha was 0.901, and for the rubric employed to the control group, it was computed as 0.838. Accordingly, all the tests carried out during the analysis were approved to be valid and reliable.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The results were elaborated in the light of the aforementioned research questions. In this manner, initially the attitudes of the population towards language learning with the help of cartoons, their motivational factors and impacts on cultural awareness of learners about the target language were all discussed in-depth.

To begin, the experimental group asserted that cartoons did attract them to read the texts in target language in general as can also be seen in Table 1 below.

The numbers represent the questions, respectively:

- 1- Did the pictures given in the texts draw your attention?
- 2- Did the pictures in the texts help you to infer the meanings of the words?
- 3- Did reading texts with pictures cause a loss of time?
- 4- Do cartoons make you feel bored?
- 5- Do you like cartoons?

**Table 1.** Attitudes of treatment group towards cartoons and learning English

Numbers of the Questions	Yes		No		I think so		Sometimes		No ideas	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	37	78.7	6	12.8	0	0.0	4	8.5	0	0.0
2	26	55.3	11	23.4	1	2.1	9	19.1	0	0.0
3	6	12.8	33	70.2	0	0.0	8	17.0	0	0.0

4	7	14.9	34	72.3	0	0.0	6	12.8	0	0.0
5	40	85.1	6	12.8	0	0.0	1	2.1	0	0.0

Most of the learners in the experimental group must have thought that pictures had drawn their attention to be engaged with an English task. It may be because of the fact that they had a positive attitude toward visuals since they were appealing as was indicated by the results for question 5 in Table 1. Moreover, these results additionally proved another evidence that the cartoons did not make the learners feel fatigued and bored while reading the classics.

Parallel to the results of the experimental group, the control group indicated their readiness and eagerness to read texts in cartoon formats, too in Table 2.

The numbers represent the questions, respectively:

- 6- Would you like to read the texts in cartoons?
- 7- Do you learn English subconsciously?
- 8- Do you learn English better with the help of vocabulary?

**Table 2.** Attitudes of the control group toward texts and learning English

Numbers of the Questions	Yes		No		I think so		Sometimes		No ideas	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
6	16	80.0	4	20.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
7	4	20.0	11	55.0	0	0.0	5	25.0	0	0.0
8	18	90.0	1	5.0	0	0.0	1	5.0	0	0.0

The control group must have expected to read stories through cartoons on the grounds that these visual tools would make learning process much easier. Furthermore, as cartoons did not necessitate a complex grammatical structure or vocabulary pool to be comprehended, the learners in control group must have had to endeavour a lot to activate their communicative competence.

Reasons	N	%
Easier	5	12.5
Intelligible. an assist to understand	7	17.5
Being visual. attractive	13	32.5
Supply the deficiency	2	5.0
Broaden horizon	2	5.0
Give specific information	1	2.5
Motivating	7	17.5
More Permanent	3	7.5
Total	40	100.0

**Figure 1.** The experimental group's motives for cartoons

Figure 1 displays that the learners in the experimental group must have liked using cartoons by the virtue of the illustrations and their attractive features in language education. However, the least selected option about cartoons was ‘giving specific information’. The probable reason the learners rated this option with the minimum percentage can be the fact that they may not have been able to use their critical thinking skills or they could not create a mind gap so as to organize all specific information acquired through cartoons.

All the motives the learners stated in both groups have reflected their positive feelings toward cartoons, and they indicate that they were satisfied with this supplementary material to be adopted to language classes. Thus, even these comments would be enough to refute the considerations of Ellman (1979) and Harris and Snow (2004) who did not admit that cartoons bring profit to the learners. On the other hand, in accordance with those results, Sones (1944), Hutchinson (1949), Kakalios (2002), Wax (2002), Haugaard (1973), Alongi (1974), Pilgreen and Krashen (1993), and Biebrich (2006) would concomitantly concur with the notion that cartoons are indispensable tools particularly from the aspects of motivation in language studies.

One other noteworthy issue dealt in this study was cultural awareness of the learners about the target language while working on some texts in the form of cartoon. Learners within the scope of this research confirmed that cartoons made them get aware of the target culture. Thus, they can be viewed as great opportunities in attaining information about the culture of the target language, which was also stressed as the 4th question in rubrics.

**Table 3.** Cultural awareness of the treatment group

Numbers of the Questions	Yes		No		I think so		Sometimes		No ideas	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	36	76.6	6	12.8	1	2.1	4	8.5	0	0.0
2	29	61.7	6	12.8	0	0.0	5	10.6	7	14.9
3	36	76.6	9	19.1	0	0.0	2	4.3	0	0.0
4	36	76.6	7	14.9	0	0.0	4	8.5	0	0.0

Clydesdale (2008) portrayed culture as a bridge to another world in that it could connect the gap between the first culture and target language. Additionally, with regards to Abbaspour et al. (2012) and Wardhaugh (2010), culture can be regarded as an invaluable item in making sense of contextual settings. That is why, to find out the possible parallelism with the cartoon texts and cultural figures in that study, three classical cartoons would be worth examining separately.

In *Romeo & Juliet*, similar to Clark (2011), love between teenagers, dating, getting married and parental blockage were explored by readers in a cultural context. The decisions behind selecting *Romeo & Juliet* stemmed from the well-known reputation between families signifying culture of honour and self-respect. A lofty love which was common in other masterpieces of Shakespeare and marriage arranged by Capulet for her daughter and Paris were the keystones in Western culture at this time period. In addition, their clothes worn at casual or important occasions were totally different from today's dressing. The streets, extraordinary building designs, the existence of a church and a friar than mosques with imams as well as the class discrimination not only in the Capulet and the Montague, but also between Romeo and the poison seller who was rather poor were all presented to the readers as cultural hints in the cartoons.

As was interpreted by Moore (2001), in *Great Expectations*, 19th century of England was described by Charles Dickens. He exhibited the discrimination among people in regards to their status in society. With the comparison of upbringings between Pip and Estella, it indicated different attitudes toward

children according to their gender. The basic cultural scenery to be considered in this story was about whether society and the communities were respected a lot in this time-course. People's dressings, manners of greeting, and leave-takings were enlightened under the heading of “culture”.

Considering Pereira and Miguel (2014), who analysed *Treasure Island* on the whole, it would not be challenging to declare that the learners must have been affected by the cultural norms in the story in many respects. The underlying reasons why learners labelled the texts as too demanding can be stated as follows. In those texts, the salient cultural figures were 'gold bars', rather than money. It may have been chosen intentionally to highlight the text in terms of treasure. Besides, 'Silver's parrot', always with him throughout the story, was a cultural unit in the way of stating that they were on an island, this was because parrots were majorly described as animals seen on the islands. Still, beyond that, Silver's and other pirates' inhumanity were signalled via that parrot while watching their hateful crimes and the hypocrisy among people. In regards to 'rum', it was placed as an important figure nearly in all settings. In a cultural sense, though it was quite ordinary to witness rum (a strong alcoholic drink) in stories, its associations with drunkenness and death were specific to this narration. Another cultural difference in texts were 'the father role'. At the beginning of the introduction, the learners must have explored who Jim's father was even though Jim was left alone to grow up in this dangerous world without taking his support. Still, apart from 'father', Jim's mother and other women characters were demonstrated in a desperate situation, which gave the message that gender roles were not on equal footing and the women in the society were ignored at that age. described elsewhere in the article.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The aim of this research was to reveal the impacts of cartoons on cultural awareness, general attitudes and motivation levels of foreign language learners. To that end, three English classics: *Romeo & Juliet* by William Shakespeare, *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, and *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson were involved in the study due to the same reason Hernandez (2010) indicated that cartoons are to advance learners' language and cultural enrichment.

In the end, similar to Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, and Ferman (1996), the research revealed that the experimental group expressed cartoons were quite motivating, easier, intelligible and attractive as a language learning vehicle. This must be not only because of the effective functions of the cartoons in the experimental group, but also the learners' language learning attitudes.

In short, the cartoons in the study were discovered to motivate foreign language learners to read English classics with which they were familiar but they had not read previously. Besides, it has been found out that they enjoyed the classics thanks to cartoons, since they were provided the opportunity of using their critical thinking skills with fun and to learn more about the English culture subconsciously.

As a future direction, a similar investigation can be suggested to be carried out in different countries where English is taught as a foreign language so as to see whether cultural awareness among participants change or not depending on varied nationalities.

#### **5. Ethics Committee Approval**

The authors confirm that ethical approval was obtained from The Council of Higher Education (Approval Date and Number 2015-396925).

## Note

This study is a part of unpublished master thesis. Ayar, Z. (2015). Teaching vocabulary through cartoons to the learners of English as a foreign language (Unpublished master's thesis). Retrieved from <http://tez.yok.gov.tr>.

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## İngilizce karikatürlerin öğrencilerin motivasyonunu ve kültürel farkındalığını arttırmadaki etkisi: Türk sınıflarından bir analiz

### Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, karikatürlerin kültürel farkındalık kazanımı ve motivasyon seviyesindeki olası artışını ikinci dil olarak İngilizceyi öğrenenler üzerinde incelemektir. Bu amaçla, Charles Dickens'ın *Great Expectations*, William Shakespeare'in *Romeo & Juliet* ve Robert Louis Stevenson 'ın *Treasure Island* adlı klasikleri uygulama için seçilmiştir. Bu yarı-deneysel araştırma deseninde 47 öğrenciye renkli ve renksiz karikatürler verilirken, rastlantısal olarak seçilen 20 kişiden oluşan kontrol grubuna aynı metinler görsel yardımcı öge kullanılmadan sunulmuştur. Araştırmacılar tarafından kapsamlı bir alan taramasının ardından geliştirilen, istatistiki olarak geçerliliği, güvenilirliği kanıtlanan ve alandan iki profesörün içerik geçerliliğini onayladığı bir değerlendirme formu çalışmaya dahil edilmiştir. Buna göre, bu araştırma karikatürlerin öğrencilerin hedef dilde kültürel farkındalıklarını ve motivasyon seviyelerini arttırdığını, ayrıca başarılarını olumlu yönde etkilediğini ortaya koymuştur.

*Anahtar sözcükler:* Karikatürler; motivasyon; kültür; tutum

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